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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is, in its most simplistic form, a philosophical perspective that links the concrete with the abstract. If experiential learning utilizes the experiences of the learner, television is part of the learner's experience, and to ignore the pervasiveness of mass media in modern society is to ignore part of the lived experience of the student. Selecting a television genre suitable for use as an experiential learning tool will depend on the communication phenomenon being examined, the desired outcome of the learning experience, and the amount of time allowed for completion of the viewing experience. Given the educational goals of a class at Saginaw Valley State University, a case could be made that evening dramas are suitable tools for experiential learning. A survey of 78 students showed that all but 12 watch evening dramas on a regular basis, indicating that students are interested in the genre. A significant element of the evening drama is its lack of closure, a feature that mirrors real life. Further, evening dramas can become a vicarious learning experience for students who have had limited life experiences. An assignment that could be used with evening dramas would require students to: (1) record the date of the drama and write a brief summary of it; (2) summarize any significant communication material shown; (3) record their reactions to the material shown; and (4) write a final paper in which they discuss their observations of human communication in evening drama. (TB)

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THE USE OF EVENING DRAMAS IN COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY

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This paper includes: 1) a brief overview of experiential learning; 2) a discussion of television as an experiential learning tool; and 3) the use of evening dramas as an experiential learning tool.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is, in its most simplistic form, a philosophical perspective which links the concrete with the abstract. By coupling the concrete and abstract elements of a lesson being presented, the learners should "attain a qualitatively superior level of knowing...confronting the learner with elements of reality which augment their understanding of the materials under investigation" (Sakofs, 1985, p. 159). Experiential learning can bring what appears to be a detached every day world outside of the classroom into learning experiences of the students enabling them to feel more connected with the world while increasing their levels of knowing in the classroom.

In 1985 Joplin proposed a five-stage experiential learning model generalized from reviewing the processes and components of programs labeling themselves as experiential. This model includes: 1) the focus of the activity in which the educator presents the task and isolates areas of concentration; 2) the action needed to complete the task which may include placing students in unfamiliar setting, yet places the responsibility on the student to embrace this new situation; 3) the support which

encourages the student to continue to try; 4) the necessary feedback which is linked to support and can be accomplished by supplying written or oral comments; and 5) the debrief step in which the conclusions and perceptions are recognized and verified against a greater body of perceptions.

Furthermore, Joplin set forth characteristics of experiential learning which should be present in the five-stage model: 1) student based rather than teacher based; 2) personal not impersonal relationship to the subject; 3) process and product orientation where the process of arriving at a conclusion is just as significant as the conclusion; 4) evaluation for internal and external reasons which includes self-evaluation; 5) holistic understanding in which the complexity of the situation is stressed over the simple summation; 6) organization around experience where the complex experience is the starting point and the analysis is the follow-up; 7) perception based rather than theory based in which a student should be able to justify his/her perceptions rather than cite experts in the field; and 8) individual based rather than group based so the individual can develop ideas and explore alternatives as an individual (p. 159-160).

The study of human communication is an ideal area in which to utilize experiential learning because the world can be used as a laboratory where the abstract theory can be easily brought to the concrete realm of the lived world. Using the characteristics and the five-step model of experiential learning set forth by

Joplin, students can participate in learning experiences in which they are actively engaged with the material being presented.

Television as an Experiential Learning Tool

In the strictest sense of what constitutes experiential learning, one could argue that television would not be a suitable tool for actually experiencing human communication phenomena. After all, television is a creation of humans for entertainment purposes. However, if experiential learning utilizes the experiences of the learner, television is part of the learner's experience and to ignore the pervasiveness of mass media in modern society is to ignore part of the lived experience of the student. Adults watch an average of 3 1/2 hours of television while teenagers watch approximately 3 hours (Clatterbuck & Dahnke, 1990). Clearly, television viewing touches the lives of people.

Television, if used as a structured educational tool, can allow students the opportunity to explore places, situations, issues and feelings through vicarious learning. In a communication classroom, vicarious learning can be a useful experiential tool when the students have not directly experienced the communication phenomenon being explored.

To successfully use television as an experiential learning tool, the TV genres should be examined for applicability to the desired learning experience. In his book TV Genres (1985), Brian Rose lists eighteen different types of programs: police,

detective, western, medical melodramas, science fiction and fantasy, soap opera, made-for-television movies, docudramas, news, documentary reports, sports, game shows, variety shows, talk shows, children's programming, educational and cultural shows, religious programming, and commercials. The Emmy Awards divide programs into eleven categories: comedy series, dramas series, miniseries, made-for-television movies, variety or music series, variety or music specials, classical programs in the performing arts, children's programs, information series,and animated programs. Because of the vastness of these categories, "television is able to explore many more commonly held cultural beliefs and values within a much more varied array of formats than motion pictures" (Lester, 1995, p. 355).

Selecting the genre suitable for use as an experiential learning tool will depend on the communication phenomenon being examined, the desired outcome of the learning experience and the amount of time allowed for completion of the viewing experience. Applying these criteria to each of the genres listed above will enable the educator to select and utilize the most appropriate genre for meeting the desired learning goals.

To further create an experience which is not just another assignment, analyzing how students in the classroom currently use television will help identify which type of genre would be desired and easily accessible to the students. For example, before selecting a genre to use in an interpersonal communication course, I surveyed 78 undergraduate students about their viewing

habits. Surprisingly, students are watching television on a regular basis with situation comedies ranking number one and evening drama, sports and television movies following in that order. When asked what category of television viewing depicts a realistic view of how humans communicate, students identified news as number one, but surprisingly situational comedies and evening drama closely followed. Although I have highlighted the top categories of television viewing by students, they also reported watching talk shows, day time dramas, game shows and MTV on a regular basis.

Another consideration when selecting a television genre for experiential learning is the goal of the assignment. An example of a genre that can be quickly adapted to many communication situations being explored is the situation comedy which presents examples of communication in a quick and lively manner. However, long term engagement in a phenomenon under study may require a genre with greater development of characters and plot lines. Also, some genres are more suitable for in-class viewing because of the time involvement. Again, an example of a genre that does not require large blocks of time for viewing is the situation comedy because it takes less than 30 minutes to view and each episode is independent of the other.

An examination of the use of film in communication pedagogy by Proctor and Adler (1991) found that educators are using feature films in their courses (p.393). However, consideration must be given to copyright infringments and the amount of time

needed to view a film. Although outside of the traditional television genres, the value of film can be applied to television because television also can provide students with a rich source of communication practices and theory and can be adapted for use in a variety of communication courses.

Evening Drama as an Experiential Learning Tool

The following section of this paper includes: 1) an overview of the evening drama viewing habits currently enrolled in communication courses; 2) a discussion of why the genre of evening dramas is a useful tool for experiential learning; 3) a discussion of how to incorporate evening dramas into classroom discussion; and 4) an assignment based on evening dramas.

A survey of 78 students showed that all but twelve students watch evening dramas on a regular basis (Krider, 1994). The number one ranked drama was 90210 with 33 students watching it followed closely by Melrose Place with 29 students watching it weekly. One student reported watching 7 evening dramas weekly, but the majority of viewing ranged between 1 to 3 dramas weekly. It is clear that asking students to view television dramas is not outside the realm of their normal television viewing habits.

With so many available television genres, selecting one genre for an experiential learning project can become a daunting task. When considering evening dramas as an experiential tool, it is important to realize that they require a commitment to viewing in order to remain involved with the characters. Understanding

each drama depends on knowledge of previous episodes. Because of the commitment of viewing, students should select a drama for analysis that he/she is actively engaged in or would like to become engaged in the viewing process.

Evening dramas can personalize the viewing experience because of the individual selection; however, using evening dramas as a learning experience works best if the learning experience is done outside of the classroom since one drama cannot be used to satisfy the viewing needs of all students in the classroom. Therefore, selection of an evening drama should be done early in the semester so that students can begin immediately with becoming engaged with the evening drama and course material. Just as the content of the course builds during a semester, the involvement in viewing the drama and abstracting the applicable course content should also build throughout the semester.

A significant element of evening drama that is not always present in other television genres is the lack of closure. This becomes a focus for examining human relationships because human interactions rarely leave people with a complete sense of closure. Also, communication models and relationship models show the process element of human communication and the evening drama can reinforce the difficulties which arise when human communication is observed only in an isolated instance. The frustration which can occur when viewing only one episode of an evening drama is not dissimilar to the frustration people experience when they try to make meaning out of one communication

interaction. The stages of relationship development often move slowly and lack closure of one stage before going to another, therefore the evening drama exemplifies the slow nature of the communication process of our daily living.

The evening drama can become a vicarious learning experience for students who have had limited life experiences. Becoming actively engaged in the lives of characters in an evening drama can move students towards empathy, understanding, and self-analysis. Even students with real life experiences can benefit from using an evening drama as a non-threatening way of discussing their own experiences publicly. It is not uncommon for students to discuss part of a drama then disclose that this is true because of a real life experience. Disclosure, which can often be awkward in an educational situation, does not become the focus of the information shared in class if it is interjected in another context such as the evening drama. Thus, the evening drama can serve as a validation of experiences privately, as well as publicly, for the students. However, it is necessary for the instructor to acknowledge the learning that has taken place when students do identify course content and make observations applicable to their lives during classroom discussions.

An assignment which can be used with evening dramas includes four stages: 1) recording the date and a brief summary of that evening's drama; 2) a summary of any significant communication material shown in the drama; 3) a reaction to the communication material found in the drama; and 4) a final paper at the end of

the semester in which students discuss their observations of human communication in evening drama after reflecting on their viewing experiences and personal experiences.

Conclusions

This paper included a discussion of experiential learning, an examination of television genres and the use of evening drama as an experiential learning tool in the communication classroom. Through the use of evening dramas, students can actively become engaged in communication experiences by either applying the drama to their life experiences or using the drama as a vicarious learning experience. In a society where television is here to stay, engaging students in an experiential relationship with television can enhance their educational experiences.

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